

Date: Tue, 10 Apr 2001 23:59:53 -0700
Subject: Public Libraries of Science
Sender: scott@cmgm.stanford.edu
To: larry_reynolds@ndsu.nodak.edu
From: scott@cmgm.stanford.edu

Dear Dr. Reynolds,

I am writing to correct some of the impressions you have gotten about the Public Library initiative. An organizing group of 12 people, who in fact have quite a lot to do other than work toward public access to internationally funded scientific literature, has been joined by about 14000 people from over 130 countries who agree with the goal, as you do too. The way to accomplish the goal is not obvious but most people feel that public involvement and government support is important (you cite worthwhile NSF involvement). We do not feel that PubMed Central is the only way to the goal, and have repeatedly emphasized our support for multiple approaches and multiple databases. The letter says "through PubMed Central and similar online public resources". "Similar online public resources" was meant to emphasize that PMC should not be the only show in town, but we probably should have expanded this statement to make it clearer. We have since repeatedly stated our opposition (for example in the recent letter to *Science*) to any monopoly situation, be it public or private like the current publisher monopolies.

The dependence all biomedical scientists now have on GenBank and PubMed is perhaps too great, but these systems have served exceedingly well and are supported by an enduring and well supported institution, the National Library of Medicine. Naturally we do not expect a publicly supported library to be cost-free or understaffed; it certainly costs a lot to run the current ones. However any private concern, for profit or not, may be terminated, bought out, or inadequately funded too, so I am puzzled by the absolute confidence you express in HighWire Press. I am at Stanford, and I am fond of HighWire Press and its considerable accomplishments. I don't know what you mean by "intimidated by HWP". I like it. I particularly like the dogs shown on their website, but they have many other good points. Many publishers have, of course, not formed any link with HighWire and it is not at all clear whether HighWire Press will have the sort of enduring stability that you and we would like to see. Will HWP exist in five years? They are located close to my house, in a rather dangerous earthquake zone! Will all publishers make available their papers to HWP? If so, or even if most do, that will be a really useful archive. I hope it happens, but additional databases including publicly funded ones should exist so that we are all assured that the scientific record will be preserved and accessible. I certainly believe this is a legitimate and indeed important use of NCBI and NLM funds. What could be more important for a national library of medicine than the research literature? As to your specific suggestion of working with HWP to gain access to its site, the HWP papers are not stored on the HWP site but instead are at the publishers' sites. Searching the publishers' websites already seems to be an immediate prospect for at least some journals. Who's done it? PubMed Central. I hope that this sort of searching becomes easy, but questions still arise. If a publisher goes out of business or is bought by a corporation that could care less about science, what happens to the digital archive? I do not agree with your implication that leaving everything in exclusive private control is a good solution to the problem. The PMC system that refers people to publishers' sites also involves arrangements to prevent later fencing off or loss of the old literature. You express support for the NSF-sponsored collaboration with HWP but criticize as inadequate the NLM-NIH plan for PMC. Both involve government support, and it is not clear which will end up being better. I would be opposed to terminating either effort until things are much clearer. If a good long-term archiving system is developed by NSF and HWP and Sun, it seems likely they'd share it with PMC. "Similar online public resources", as our letter says, can encompass both.

Like you, I have worked hard for my Society. I was president of the Society for Developmental Biology, which is supported by its journal *Developmental Biology*. Many people who have been leaders of their societies have supported the proposals for public archives and public access. They have done this in the belief that systems could be worked out to protect income for journals and societies while ensuring better access and preservation of the vast amount of publicly funded scientific literature. You accuse us of "ramming our views down your throat" yet your view of the goals seems to be much like ours. We do not have a monolithic view of how to accomplish those goals, and I am sorry you got that impression. The political pressure about the topic have indeed provoked some criticism, but at the same time there has been a precipitous set of announcements of free access to back issues of journals. Each publisher is determining the amount of time they must hold the literature as their own to ensure continued good subscription rates, and many have decided that 6 months is reasonable. The journal that supports our society is now free on the web even for the current issue. No one wants the journals to collapse. Nothing we propose would prevent societies

from making money from their journals. I know about the finances of society journals, and I also know that many people in the societies do not. I did not agree with some of the statements in the response that offended you (which is why I did not sign it), but I also know that a rather small proportion of the profits from society journals makes it from the publishers to the societies. I do not expect this to change in the short run, but if the financial picture was more widely known I suspect changes would occur and our libraries and societies would be better off for it. The Company of Biologists (<http://usa.biologists.com/>) is a good example of an organization that publishes first-rate journals while giving back their profits to science.

We are not, as you imply, claiming to know all the answers. The huge ground swell of support for better public archiving and access and search systems constitutes public pressure to get publishers and societies and indeed everyone who is interested to come up with good ideas about how to do all this better. That pressure has been quite effective; there is vastly more public access now than there was a few months ago. There is an energetic and creative public discussion of how best to ensure access and new search capabilities. The present system, of entering a new password for each publisher whose site you have to visit, and of little access at all for those not located at a university or company with lots of subscriptions, does not seem good to most people. Nor are the present search capabilities close to what we all need, in part because publishers have had little motivation to provide such services. The publishers are not eager to open their archives to each other or to the public. "CrossRef" (<http://www.crossref.org/home.htm>) is a good example of an inadequate solution, since it does not ensure free access even to old literature. With 14000 people (not 12) asking for real progress, real progress is coming. That mobilization of effort is likely to make your goal and ours a reality. The sense of opportunity and international enterprise is driving many people to work toward good solutions. There is also a strong sense of the scientific literature as a publicly funded resource that should be accessible to the people who paid for it and who carried out the research. I emphasize here once more that PubMed Central can be part, but not all, of the solution and we welcome others. Please also be careful in talking about "self-serving interests in promoting one's own views". There is nothing in our efforts for any of us personally except an enduring hope for a better system, and we welcome ideas from others. Thanks for writing.

Sincerely yours,

Matthew Scott